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Engineers of Power: An Agency of Unchecked Clout

By Michael Grunwald

Washington Post Staff Writer

Sunday, September 10, 2000; Page A01

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EAST PRAIRIE, Mo.

The developer of a huge project to control flooding in Missouri's soggy southeastern bootheel expects to drain 36,000 acres of wetlands along the Mississippi River. That's almost enough wetlands to cover the District of Columbia – and nearly twice as many as all of America's developers were permitted to touch last year.

The developer plans to plug a quarter-mile gap in an earthen levee to lock the river into its channel, then build two giant pumps to get rid of rain. But while the \$65 million venture is being promoted as an economic lifeline for water-weary East Prairie, the developer's fine print suggests this farm town will flood almost as often after it's built.

The consensus in the Clinton administration is that this megaproject must be stopped. "An environmental debacle," says a White House aide. "Absolutely ridiculous," scoffs Bill Hartwig, a regional Fish and Wildlife Service

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regional Fish and Wildlife Service director. "A crazy idea," agrees James Lee Witt, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Probably the dumbest project around," says a top Environmental Protection Agency official.

The Army Corps of Engineers is part of the Clinton administration, too. It is a public works agency in the Pentagon chain of command, reporting to an assistant Army secretary. It is also an environmental agency, legally responsible for protecting the nation's dwindling wetlands – ecologically sensitive areas ranging from seasonally flooded farmland to year-round swamps. But the Corps has a different take on the St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway Project.

It's the developer.

And in many ways, this pariah of a project is par for the Corps, one of the oldest, largest and most unusual agencies in the federal government. It is an executive branch bureaucracy that takes marching orders from Congress, a military-run organization with an overwhelmingly civilian work force, an environmental regulator despised by environmentalists. The Corps has \$62 billion worth of civil works projects underway – three times the federal spending on cancer research over the last decade. It has about 35,000 employees – more than the Energy, Labor and Education departments put together.

This series will explore how an agency born as a regiment in George Washington's army has built clout in the city that bears his name, and how it uses that clout to reconfigure the American landscape. A Washington Post review of Corps activities across the nation, supported by more than 1,000 interviews and tens of thousands of pages of documents, found that the agency is converting its strong congressional relationships into billions of dollars' worth of taxpayer-funded water projects, many with significant environmental costs and minimal economic benefits.

Members of Congress authorize the projects to steer federal money to their districts, and the Corps often justifies them with questionable

of billions of dollars worth of water projects around America, including many that damaged the environment.

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technical studies. This pro-construction mentality has been fueled by Corps commanders, who have launched an agency-wide campaign to "seek growth opportunities," internal memos show. The result is a fragmented national network of channelized rivers and deepened ports, cobbled together by log-rolling and deal-cutting by individual lawmakers, instead of comprehensive planning by federal officials.

The East Prairie plan has the hallmarks of many of the Corps projects reviewed by The Post. It has fierce support from local residents as well as a fervent congressional advocate, Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.). The Corps justified it with a distorted cost-benefit analysis – the assumptions included a 2.5 percent interest rate that dates back to the Eisenhower administration – and deflected strong objections from environmental agencies. The bulk of the project's benefits will flow to a few well-connected local farmers, but the federal rules that would have forced them to help pay for it were waived in Washington. And despite the administration's outrage, the project may soon become a reality.

Corps commanders refused scores of interview requests, under orders from Gen. Joe Ballard, the agency's recently retired chief engineer. But in written responses to questions from The Post, and in their public statements, they have called the Corps a model of public service, firmly committed to promoting economic development, newly dedicated to conserving ecosystems and federal funds as well. They describe the Corps as an apolitical military organization, simply following orders produced by the democratic process.

Earlier this year – after a whistle-blower charged that Corps officials had manipulated an economic study to justify billion-dollar lock expansions on the Mississippi River, and after leaked documents showed that senior commanders had drawn up a "Project Growth Initiative" to boost the agency's budget and expand its missions – Ballard angrily told a Senate subcommittee that the Corps is not a "rogue agency."

"I am confident that the Army Corps of Engineers is pursuing its mission with the utmost professionalism and integrity, and will continue to serve this nation well," he said.

Almost all modern presidents have clashed with the Corps – and the Corps has usually won. Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson and Nixon all considered reforms that went nowhere. In 1977, President Carter tried to kill a "hit list" of 19 water projects, an effort that not only failed, but permanently damaged his relationship with Congress. In 1986, President Reagan did force Congress to make local communities pay more for Corps projects, but only in exchange for a costly new round of projects. This spring, President Clinton's Army secretary, Louis Caldera, tried to reaffirm executive branch control of the Corps, only to withdraw his proposed reforms a week later after a Capitol Hill backlash.

Now another intense battle is raging over the Corps – over who should

control the agency, whether it should grow or shrink, and how much it should shift its focus from construction projects that degrade the environment to restoration projects that clean up old damage. It may not be the sexiest of Beltway brawls, but it will have a dramatic effect on America.

Corps levees and floodwalls protect millions of homes, farms and businesses. Its coastal ports and barge channels carry 2 billion tons of freight annually. Its dams generate one-fourth of America's hydroelectric power. Its water recreation sites attract more visitors than the National Park Service's. Its land holdings would cover Vermont and New Hampshire.

But the Corps may have its greatest impact on nature. It quietly presides over many of the nation's hottest environmental issues, from oil drilling on Alaska's North Slope to dam removal on the Snake River to water wars on the Missouri River to restoration of Florida's Everglades. It is in the thick of furors over endangered species, endangered rivers, ocean dumping, beach erosion, agricultural pollution, floodplain sprawl. It cleans up industrial and nuclear waste. In its regulatory role, it approves thousands of private projects that destroy modest amounts of wetlands; in its construction role, it is pushing several public projects that could destroy huge amounts of wetlands. So the future direction of the Corps will help determine the future health of America's environment.

To conservationists, that is not a comforting thought. They know the Corps as a dredge-and-destroy agency that builds massive dams, dikes and levees, domesticating wild rivers into straight and narrow barge canals. Its leaders have pledged to reinvent the Corps as a "greener" organization, but they still battle traditional environmental agencies on almost every major issue. To many environmentalists, the Corps is still Public Enemy Number One, and almost all of its major projects are still greeted with environmental lawsuits.

"The Corps still doesn't get it," said Hartwig, whose Fish and Wildlife regional office is fighting the project in East Prairie. "They still think they can defeat Mother Nature with brilliant engineering. They talk about the environment, but they don't really believe in it."

Joseph Westphal, the Clinton appointee who oversees the Corps, argues that it is unfair to dwell on the past, on ancient boondoggles built under orders from Congress in eras oblivious to ecological concerns. The real story, he says, is that the Corps has begun to appreciate the value of flora and fauna, and that its spending on environmental programs has quadrupled since 1992. The modern Corps is planting trees, creating wetlands, even dismantling a few of its dams, dikes and levees. It is restoring some of the river bends and backwaters it once wiped out, chauffeuring salmon past the fish-pulverizing dams it once built, and preparing to lead a \$7.8 billion effort to undo the damage it once inflicted upon the Everglades.

"I can't say there's as much progress as I'd like, but there's definitely progress, real progress," said Westphal, the assistant Army secretary for civil works.

Westphal, an amiable political science professor who once ran the congressional Sun Belt Caucus, is supposed to supervise the civil works program, but he has rarely intervened in Corps decisions. Even though the overwhelming majority of the agency's employees are civilians, military commanders run its 49 districts and divisions, where the real work gets done. And under Ballard, a three-star general who pounds out e-mails in capital letters, the Corps virtually declared independence from the Clinton administration.

So while the Corps is showing some signs of modernization, it is also marching ahead with a new round of old-style projects, from the world's largest water pump in the Mississippi Delta to the world's largest beach replenishment along the New Jersey coast, from a \$641 million lock replacement in a New Orleans canal to a \$377 million harbor deepening in Wilmington, N.C. Local interests propose the projects, and members of Congress ram them into law, but none of them could happen without the cooperation of the Corps.

The East Prairie project is particularly anachronistic, and not only because of its outsize impact on wetlands. Its main flood control protection is not for East Prairie, but for waterlogged farmland in a sparsely inhabited area called the New Madrid Floodway. It's called a floodway because in a serious Mississippi rise, the Corps is supposed to let the river overwhelm the entire 180-square-mile area to protect more populated river communities.

In other words, the Corps is now trying to provide flood protection for an area it may end up flooding on purpose.

"It's just insane," says Mark Boone, a fisheries biologist for the Missouri Department of Conservation. "It's like the rest of the world woke up, and the Corps is still asleep."

So on one hand, the federal government is paying people billions of dollars to move homes and businesses away from floodplains; on the other hand, the Corps is pushing an economic development project not only in a natural floodplain, but in an official floodway. Meanwhile, at a time when the nation is officially committed to restoring wetlands – which serve as kitchens and nurseries for countless species, filter water that ends up in faucets, and reduce flood damages by absorbing excess water – this project would destroy wetlands.

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